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ABSTRACT

As schools attempt to accommodate an increasing range of students with disabilities, linguistic differences, or other unique requirements, teachers worry about their preparation to deal with these differences. General education teachers do not always have the necessary background. Special education teachers may have only limited knowledge about the general curriculum and general education teaching practices. Two options are possible to solve this dilemma: (1) "hybrid" teachers with the capacity to work with general and special education students because of their training in both fields; and (2) to make groups of teachers collectively responsible for groups of diverse learners. A key feature of mixed-ability grouping practice is that teachers share working with all children and youth as part of a team. (SLD)

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Brief discussions of critical issues in Urban Education

On Teacher Preparation and Support in Inclusive Schools

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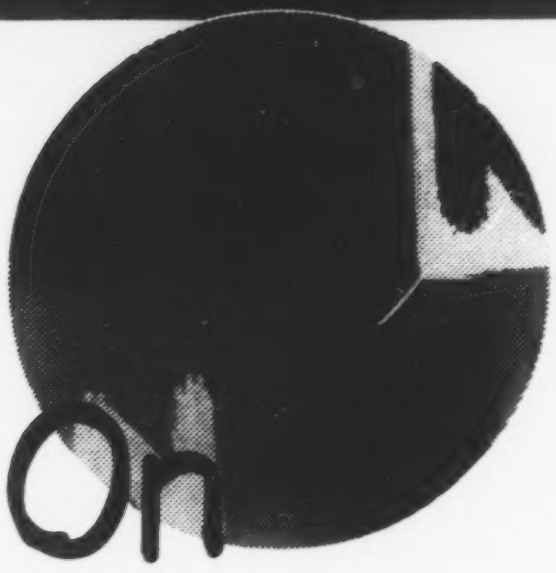

Preparing Teachers for the Future

As American schools seek to accommodate an increasing range of students, teachers are challenged as never before. When students with disabilities, linguistic differences or other unique abilities join general education classrooms, even willing teachers fear their lack of training and preparation to deal with such differences make their role as primary teacher inappropriate and inadequate.

At the same time, special education teachers, foreign and second language teachers, worry that when their students are included in classrooms they will not receive the support and assistance they need to learn well. In many urban settings there are simply too few qualified teachers to fill classrooms and districts must rely upon community members with emergency credentials. Everyone is calling for more and different teacher preparation, inservice, and support to meet such demands.

It's very difficult to really bring about a quality program when you're struggling just to educate the people who are educating.

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Are General Educators Prepared to Work with Students with Disabilities?

No and Yes.

Our system has created teachers with different sets of knowledge and information. The system is also set up to make one teacher's knowledge legitimate in one situation while a differently prepared teacher's knowledge is not considered worthwhile or valid.

General educators sometimes **know** some important things about the learners with disabilities included in their classrooms. They also know many things about curriculum and teaching that will "work" with such students. But their status as "general" educators makes that knowledge automatically suspect in the face of the "official" knowledge possessed by special educators whose labels match the students'. Even though general educators often spend more time observing and interacting with labeled students in their classrooms, their presumed proper role and responsibility is to accept and implement the special educator's expertise as the system's approved specialist in teaching and learning for students with labels. As Seymour Sarason (1990) sees the situation,

> *School personnel are graduates of our colleges and universities. It is there that they learn there are at least two types of human beings, and if you choose to work with one of them you render yourself legally and conceptually incompetent to work with others (p. 258).*

Can't Special Educators Teach General Educators How to Work With Students With Disabilities?

It Sounds Like a Good Idea, but it Doesn't Quite Work.

There's an enormous gap in special ed teachers not knowing the curriculum . . . Students need to read. They need to do math and science. Where is that content coming from?

We have spent several generations creating a system of public education where different forms of information as well as different types of people are carefully separated. This history of sorting and separating both students and teachers has resulted in very little common ground. Special educators have limited knowledge about the general education curriculum and teaching practices, while general educators remain equally uninformed about special education. General and special educators know a few of the same things about schools, teaching, and learning, but most of the knowledge and skills they rely upon to fulfill their professional responsibilities seem so unique – even mysterious – that sometimes they must feel as if they are barely in the same profession. Making one teacher's knowledge more valuable than another's in some situations is a result of our history that is just as insupportable as creating the separations in the first place.

In a recent survey (1998) the National Center for Education Statistices found that while 54% of the teachers taught limited English proficient or culturally diverse students, and 71% taught students with disabilities, only 20% reported feeling well-prepared to meet the needs of these students.

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General educators were prepared to teach to the "middle" of groups of students and identify "different" students for referral. To do otherwise would be *un*professional since students with learning differences were presumed to need different curricula and different teaching. For their part, special educators' expertise eventually became so unconnected with general education goals and purposes, that many students achieved much different outcomes than their nondisabled peers.

Special Education has this notion that different outcomes are acceptable for students with disabilities because their education is "individualized." Unfortunately, such different outcomes are often also unequal outcomes.

Don't We Need Teachers Who Can Work With All Students?

Yes and No.

It is impossible for **all** educators to become "generalists" or "Super Teachers" who possess **all** the skills and information needed to serve the learning of **any** student. It's very unlikely that anyone could possibly achieve such mastery and competence.

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Instead there are two other options.

Option 1:

A New Hybrid Teacher:

Increasingly initial teacher preparation programs are merging foundational general and special education content and licensure outcomes. Some states are simultaneously shifting from restrictive, "stand alone" licensure categories to a greater emphasis on the use of "add on" specialty endorsements to initial, usually broader, licenses. Innovative continuing professional development opportunities also encourage general and special educators to study their profession, sometimes even with initially preparing teachers.

As these trends continue, more and more teachers will enter teaching with a solid, and often integrated grounding in what we have traditionally thought of as *general* and *special* education. These new *hybrid* teachers will have the capacity to work with more diverse groups of students because they have learned the best parts of the previously separate "general" and "special" education traditions without having to label them so.

> Prepare all teachers with a common core of knowledge and capacity in the theories and strategies of the teaching/learning event and then systematically expand all teachers' capacity to use those basic skills across more and more student diversity through continuing professional development.

Despite such a strong foundation, there will still be students and situations that require even more specific expertise than such a *hybrid* educator can offer.

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Option 2:

Group Practice: Instead of assigning only one teacher to a classroom of 20 or more learners, or to a content area with instructional responsibility for 150-250 students, groups of teachers should be collectively responsible for groups of diverse learners. Only through group practice will educators be able to combine their talents and information and work together to meet the demands of student diversity in ways that retain the benefits and overcome the limits of past practice.

Groups of teachers can bring to the teaching/learning task both the common store of knowledge and skills, as well as different areas of specialty. Some teachers might pursue a specialty in literacy teaching or social studies. Others might develop expertise in providing behavioral and emotional supports or using technology. Still others might acquire a specialty in learning assessment and diagnostics or working with families and social service agency personnel. Taken together, then, such groups of teachers collectively possess both the breadth and the depth to meet the learning needs of very diverse groups of students.

What Do We Do If We Are Already Teaching?

A common first step among special educators is to assign various special education support staff within a building – resource room teacher, speech/language specialist, Title 1 teacher, self-contained classroom teacher – to a smaller number of general education classrooms where they can be responsible for students with all the labels they had each separately served across a much larger number of classrooms. While the previous resource room

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teacher may feel unprepared to assist the student with significant multiple disabilities, learning how to gather that information from colleagues with different specialties is a "step on the way" to more complete group practice with general educators.

Other schools are organizing all teachers into work groups that include some number of general educators as well as one or more special educators and other certified or classified support staff. Being part of the design of general education curriculum from the beginning means that special educators no longer have to try to "fit" labeled students into a completed plan. It also creates opportunities for special educators to teach more aspects of the plan to all the students instead of being relegated as "helpers" for those that might be having trouble or need extra help or support.

Some buildings are reorganizing around grade-level or block teams, in which groups meet regularly to share curriculum planning, allocate resources, schedule activities, share teaching tasks (e.g. rotating the class through each of the three or four teachers when doing a unit, each teacher focusing on material according to his/her strengths and interests), and to problem solve issues on behalf of the now "mutually owned" students. In some international schools, teams stay with their students for as many as 10 years to achieve maximum benefits of long-term relationships among teachers, students and families. Some American schools are moving toward a 2-5 year commitment with the same group of students.

Finally, licensure systems can help by ***replacing restrictive assignments with shared assignments.*** Current teacher licensure practices tend to be restrictive, limiting the educator to teaching only students in specific categories. Of course, some of these categories are broader than others, ranging from specific disabilities ("LD" or "MR" certifications for learning disabilities and mental retardation respectively) to "levels" of students ("mild", "severe") to disability types and particular ages (secondary severe, or elementary LD).

One key feature of mixed-ability group teaching practice is that teachers share working with all children and youth as part of a team, regardless of their formal preparation or the labels on their certification. This step seems critical because it is one of the most efficient ways for teachers more narrowly educated to "cross-pollinate", quickly increasing the size of their common ground. More importantly, shared assignments create the contexts in which genuine collaboration can occur.

Sources:

Sarason, S. (1990). The predictable failure of educational reform. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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